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Curious tale is left with us as farewell

Due to interactive dynamic transmogrification of horizontal and vertical factors of form, process and function at this newspaper, this is the last Barely Civil column I'll write.

That means I have been promoted to reporting on national security matters. Good for me and, I hope, bad for the commies.

If there is anything I like doing more than bashing bureaucrats or tying two cats' tails together and tossing them over a clothesline, it's helping smash Soviet imperialism.

I mean to do that, of course, fairly and objectively, the way all good little newsmen do.

I've never been particularly good at farewells. So it's a good time to ask, "Who invented the radio?"

Nine out of 10 persons will give the wrong answer to that question. Not because they're dumb, but because they have been given disinformation all of their lives.

Even most of the almanacs have it wrong.

Nope, it wasn't Marconi.

It was Nikola Tesla, a man whose prodigious powers of mind and scientific foresight are still held in awe by scientists all over the world.

Marconi's patent of the radio was tossed out by the Supreme Court in 1943, just after Tesla died. The high court kayoed Marconi in part because Tesla's achievements in radio transmission preceded Marconi's work.

Tesla was demonstrating an elaborate radio-controlled model boat and dreaming about sending electrical power across the Atlantic Ocean before Marconi figured out how to plink "S-O-S" across town.

Who was the father of modern electricity? Not Thomas Alva Edison, but Nikola Tesla.

Oh, sure, Edison was a leader. But he backed the wrong approach to electrical transmission.

Edison thought direct current — the kind you get when you hook up batteries — was the way to go. But Tesla figured that direct current can only be sent for a few miles, while alternating current could be transmitted over great distances with almost no drop in power.

The two men slugged it out in the trenches of the inventor's workbench, and Tesla won the "war of the currents."

Tesla was born in 1856 in Lika, Croatia, now part of Yugoslavia. He came to New York in 1884 to work with Edison. But sparks flew between the two over

technical differences, and Tesla left to follow his own path.

He was particularly interested in high-frequency mechanical and electrical vibrations. He once claimed that — with only a pocket-size vibrator — he could generate tremors that would split the earth in two.

Some of his experiments were fantastic, like something out of an early film version of Dr. Frankenstein's monster. He built enormous coils at his laboratory near Colorado Springs, with which he generated up to 12 million volts of electricity and hurled bolts of artificial lightning hundreds of feet through the air.

Much of what he did was shrouded in mystery, and some of his experiments have never been duplicated.

Some admirers claim that Tesla foresaw the so-called "star wars" program. He tried to sell the War Department on the idea of building death rays that he claimed could melt enemy war planes at distances of hundreds of miles.

Tesla, a bit of an eccentric, never married. In his declining years, he said he received signals from distant planets, and he spent a great deal of time feeding pigeons in Central Park.

When he died at 10:30 p.m. on Jan. 7, 1943, intelligence agents from all over the world ransacked his hotel apartment for his notes and papers. Some of those papers are held even now in the archives of various U.S. intelligence and defense agencies, where they are studied for clues that might be useful in modern weaponry.

Now. How come — in the "Age of Information" — you never heard of Nikola Tesla?

Perhaps the answer is that Nikola Tesla didn't have a good press agent or a blown-dry hairdo. His virtual erasure from popular history illustrates that data is not information if it merely transmits the biases of the vessel through which it is funneled.

In other words, when every one of the press pack nods his well-coiffed head, flashes his gleaming smiles and agrees that, "Yes, that's the way the world is tonight," it's time to doubt.

When you think you — or they — know all there is to know about anything at all, from the cost of the civil service retirement system to the role of the Soviet bloc in Nicaragua, think about the genius of Nikola Tesla.

And how little you've heard of him.